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Formative Sociology and Ethico-Political Imaginaries: Opening Up Transnational Responses to Palestine–Israel¹

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Abstract

Recent contributors to this journal have sought to radicalise sociology by exploring how the discipline might expand political imaginaries and take up non-reductionist notions of everyday ethics. In a related move, sociologists are exploring the performative potential of sociological practices and sensibilities, while anthropologists are reframing the relationship of ethnography to theory. This article contributes to these projects by focusing on an acute case in which an expanded political imaginary is urgently needed; the tensions between political solidarity and ethical violence in transnational communications around Palestine–Israel. Drawing on an ethnographic study of conflicting activist groups in Britain, I highlight a profound ethical problem: that claims for justice appear to entail a violent refusal to acknowledge ‘the other’. The article examines how the dualistic logics structuring sociological imaginaries have occluded and reproduced this impasse, and focuses on an attempt by activists to create non-violent modes of solidarity. Articulating a role for ethnography in opening up this alternative, I show how responsive and creative sociological methods can bring new languages, imaginaries and political formations into being.

Keywords: boycott, dialogue, ethics, ethnography, Israel–Palestine

In July 2014, the British media began to report on an escalation of conflict in Gaza and Israel. By August, the duration of the violence had exceeded the 2008–9 and 2012 crises and campaigners in Britain organised what they described as the largest pro-Palestine demonstrations yet to take place in London (BBC News, 2014). With polls suggesting that mainstream public opinion had hardened against Israel and many people speaking out in support of Palestinian rights, there appeared to have been an unprecedented shift in perceptions of the conflict among the British public (Watt, 2014). However, even as pro-Palestine campaigns gathered momentum, the vexed issue of antisemitism featured prominently in the media. Reports that events in the Middle East were giving rise to renewed hostility towards the Anglo-Jewish community resonated with fears around the rise of far-right, nationalist and Islamic ‘extremist’ movements in Europe. These claims crystallised around the growing Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign (BDS) and focused in particular on its most controversial strands, the cultural and academic boycott of Israel. In one high profile incident, a London theatre became embroiled in controversy after attempting to withdraw from hosting a Jewish film festival partly funded by the Israeli embassy (Pitchon, 2014). In the subsequent fall-out, well-rehearsed charges of antisemitism and counter-claims asserting the legitimacy of boycott were amplified across mass and social media.

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In this article, I take these visceral tensions in transnational communications around Palestine-Israel as an acute case calling out for an imaginative sociological response. Focusing on pressing questions of boycott, I claim that sociologists must attend to ethical violence as we seek to re-imagine possibilities for justice and that, following Latimer and Skeggs' (2011), this requires a sociological practice that not only critiques but also acts on futures. The article begins by exploring how tensions between political solidarity and ethical violence, which emerge in transnational engagements with Palestine – Israel, have been framed as a philosophical as opposed to sociological problem. I explain this by highlighting how reductionist moral and political imaginaries within social theory have occluded attention to questions of ethical relationality. Then, learning from sociologists cultivating 'live' and 'provocative' methods (Back and Puwar, 2012; Motamedi-Fraser, 2012) and inspired by an 'ordinary ethics' attentive to the vitality of language (Das, 2007; Lambek, 2010), I seek to open up an ethico-political response to this predicament.

Ethico-politics as a sociological concern: transnational communication around Palestine – Israel

In recent years, intensifying debates in Britain around the cultural and academic boycott of Israel have followed a familiar pattern. On one side, the emphasis on boycotting *communication* with Israeli institutions has been justified tactically, as a means of empowering British-based activists, academics and artists to delegitimise the Israeli State. It has also been justified on a more principled basis, as an expression of opposition to the Israeli government's strategy of what is termed 'normalisation', in which seemingly benign international artistic and academic 'mutual' dialogue initiatives undermine the struggle against colonial structures (Butler, 2012; PACBI, 2014). From this perspective, those who call for reciprocal dialogue are complicit with this unjust order by abstracting from and so disavowing the unequal and oppressive relations between Israel and the Palestinians (Hassouna, 2016). Furthermore, it has been argued that when opponents of boycott denounce international BDS activists as 'extremist' for rejecting dialogue, they draw on Orientalist tropes of the irrational, un-Enlightened Arab or Muslim 'other' and contribute to the racialising discourse of the 'War on Terror' (Werbner, 2013; Sheldon, 2016).

While opponents of cultural and academic boycott in Britain have taken at times contradictory positions, they have shared an emphasis on its violent resonances in this historical context. A key argument has been that antisemitic tropes and logics can be expressed in the symbolic act of boycott irrespective of an individual's conscious intention (Hirsh, 2010) and that boycotting the activities of Israeli citizens in effect holds those individuals collectively responsible for the actions of their government (Lynskey, 2014). In this sense, cultural and academic boycott is perceived to single the 'Jewish people' out (in Israel and the Diaspora) by demanding that they oppose normalising projects 'associated' (in a sense that is variously interpreted) with the Israeli State or be found complicit. As such it is claimed that BDS refuses to acknowledge the heterogeneity and complexity of Israeli and Jewish positions, in contrast to the treatment of citizens elsewhere in the world. Furthermore, the enactment of boycott in Britain is portrayed as problematic because of echoes with histories of European antisemitism, which have arguably persecuted 'the Jewish people' according to just such a racialising logic.

These seemingly intractable debates have been reproduced within the academy, in high profile struggles between prominent intellectuals (see for example Butler, 2006; Hirsh, 2010), and may evoke feelings of unease for those academics who are not definitively committed to

‘one side’ of the boycott debate (Back, 2008). In what follows, I suggest that this unsettling sense that there is no right way to respond indexes a profound tension in transnational communications around Palestine – Israel. For while reports of the suffering, dispossession and racism experienced by Palestinians call out for public expressions of transnational solidarity, it seems that these political grammars can also fix the Jewish, Arab or Muslim ‘other’ in ways that carry troubling resonances with entangled histories of European antisemitism and Orientalism (Anidjar, 2003; Wright, 2016; Sheldon, 2016).¹

While the tension between political solidarity and what has been termed ‘ethical violence’ has rarely been the subject of sociological attention, it has been theorised by philosophers concerned with relational ethics and the conditions of justice in Palestine – Israel (Frosh, 2011). This frames a tension between ethical subjectivity, as a pre-ontological asymmetrical responsibility to respond to the alterity and singularity of ‘the Other’, and justice, understood as weighing up the claims of named ‘ethnic’, ‘national’ or ‘religious’ groups (‘Israelis’, ‘Palestinians’, ‘Jews’, ‘Arabs’, ‘Muslims’) according to principles of symmetry, reciprocity and substitutability (Strhan, 2012). This theorisation can help deepen our understanding of the grammatical tensions in communications around Palestine – Israel, such as when calls for mutual dialogue *and* calls for boycott invoke necessary but reductive collective pronouns. More specifically, notions of ethical relationality can illuminate the violent psychosocial effects of symbolic political grammars. For in fixing ‘us’ against ‘them’, these oppositional practices disavow the complexity, singularity and opacity of the people drawn into this conflict (Frosh, 2011). To describe this as violent is to draw attention to the painful *experience* of being denied the possibility of expressing complex or ambivalent feelings, and it is to highlight how this form of repression can have damaging psychic and social repercussions.

However, a key claim of this article is that the ethical stakes of Palestine – Israel need to be received as a *sociological* problem and that this can expand our sense of what we can do with and to the discipline (Latimer and Skeggs, 2011). My suggestion is that the ethical tensions arising in the transnational politics of Palestine – Israel call for a sociological response, insofar as they are shaped through specific social processes and structures, which the discipline is uniquely positioned to explore. This includes analysis of the fraught dynamics of highly mediated symbolic modes of communication in the context of a spatially dispersed, hierarchically structured and technologically mediated transnational public sphere (Lynch, 2012; Fraser, 2008). Furthermore, the empirical sensibility and methods of sociology can draw us closer to lived experiences of ethical tensions which emerge within specific socio-historical and institutional contexts, helping us to engender *situated* responses.

Ethnographic imagination and ordinary ethics

In asking how sociology might begin to receive and address tensions between ethical violence and political solidarity, I begin with an epistemological question: what is the role of the imagination in this process? This, of course, raises a prior question, for, as Latimer and Skeggs (2011) emphasise, any call for a *re-imagining* of the political must say something about how it conceives of the imagination. Their response is to locate the imagination as a conceptual, somatic and relational force and space of knowledge. My own approach develops this vision by drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later writing to explore the role of language in the ethnographic imagination.²

In an aphorism taken up by anthropologists (Das, 1998) Wittgenstein writes that ‘to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1967 [1953]: para.19). With

these deceptively simple words, Wittgenstein threads together language, imagination and life, inviting us to reflect on the nature and relationship of each these terms. His comment resonates with feminist epistemologies in taking the imagination to be a faculty that transcends antinomies of rational / embodied, individual / collective, conceptual / corporeal and linguistic / experiential knowledge. As Stoelzer and Yuval-Davis (2002) observe, a related source here is Spinoza who writes of the imagination as a corporeal aspect of the body's self-awareness (the mind), which emerges out of the embodied experience of relationality. Wittgenstein shares this insight into the interrelatedness of imaginaries and modes of living, highlighting how they are mutually constitutive, shaping each other in an iterative relationship. He also takes this further, inviting us to attend to the role of language in these processes, as a conceptual, natural and relational form of life. In this framing, language is not merely a symbolic structure that represents experience. Rather, as Motamedi-Fraser (2012) puts this, words can be active participants in relationships, so that the process of imagining new languages can be generative of new ethical and political formations.

In their reflections on creativity, Latimer and Skeggs highlight 'how hard it is' for sociologists to keep open as we require energy to defer from making habitual judgements which close down possibilities (2011: 394). Learning from Wittgenstein, we might consider how this is partly a struggle to question the dualistic grammars constitutive of sociology as a territorialised discipline of European Enlightenment modernity (Latimer and Skeggs, 2011). This dualistic inheritance has profoundly shaped the sociological study of morality and can be traced in classical and contemporary theories of symbolic power and cultural structures (Pellandini-Simanyi, 2014; Lynch, 2012; Alexander, 2003). However, within the neighbouring discipline of anthropology, some scholars have challenged the reductionism of dominant Foucauldian and Durkheimian framings of the moral. Notions of power-knowledge and conflation of the social, linguistic and moral order have been found wanting insofar as they mark off the moral as a 'higher' symbolic domain separate from everyday life, which stands outside of and constrains the subject, or imagine morality as an integrative social force that delimits the inside from the outside of a community (Das, 2011; Seidler, 2007; Lambek, 2010). Furthermore, as Singh (2014) has observed, such theories have reproduced the dualistic paradigms of domination / resistance, identity / difference, self / other which also constitute the dominant political topography of 'Western' societies. This disciplinary genealogy has made it difficult for sociology to address ethical *experiences* of tension, ambiguity and ambivalence. It has also prohibited attention to creative, non-oppositional responses to the kind of political bind that is so vividly instantiated by the Palestine – Israel conflict. How then might sociologists, shaped by theoretical traditions which reproduce this impasse, begin to imagine forms of political action which are also ethical?

In this article, I respond to this question by making a connection with recent anthropological work in 'ordinary ethics', which has refigured the relationship of ethnography to theory and has questioned the separation and priority granted to the theoretical domain over everyday experience (Das 2007; Lambek, 2010; Singh, 2014). This approach invites us to turn towards the concrete materiality of 'what we say when' - to our grammatical improvisations within specific 'everyday' contexts of language use (Lambek, 2010:2). In this way, we can challenge a dominant theory of language, heavily influenced by Saussurean semiotics, which assumes that responses to Palestine – Israel must operate within the parameters of oppositional symbolic structures (Lynch, 2012; Alexander and Dromi, 2015). We can instead open up the multiple relationships of language to experience, explore how these are technologically

mediated and ask how this shapes different relationships with ourselves and with others (Das, 2007; Seidler, 2007).

In what follows, I exemplify this practice by presenting an extended case study of a struggle over boycott and dialogue within a British university campus. This analysis is part of a fourteen-month ethnographic study of UK student politics relating to Palestine – Israel³ and draws on fieldnotes, a transcribed audio recording and online communications from a campus event that was subject to boycott. My discussion focuses on the multiple thresholds and registers of these communicative encounters, attending to the mediation and materiality of the languages used. My aim is to show how sociology might strive toward a more intimate engagement with this issue while highlighting the difficulties of this process. As a Jewish ethnographer who has grown up in Britain, I found myself implicated in complex ways with this transnational conflict, feeling ongoing ambivalence as I participated in the events I describe. Through my own family history, I carried a particular sense of shame and responsibility into this fieldwork, so that I found myself empathetic towards the call for boycott and sceptical of the encounter that I describe here, only subsequently pushing myself to attend to it anew. Yet this process was important, for as Veena Das (2007) observes, in order to expand our imaginaries, ethnographers must suspend our intellectual and moralising compulsion toward abstraction and judgement, engage in the perhaps uncomfortable labour of being *present* within our research, and allow ourselves to be changed by relationships within and beyond the field.

A case study: the symbolic grammars of dialogue and boycott on campus

The politics of Palestine – Israel has been a pivotal issue within UK student politics for over four decades, manifesting in ongoing conflicts between groups defining themselves as pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli within campuses. In 2011, the student Jewish Society at one such institution publicised an intervention that sounded unusual. Their email explained that BBR Saatchi and Saatchi Israel, in partnership with the Peres Centre for Peace, had recently developed a competition called, ‘The Impossible Brief... to design an advertising solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict’. The winning idea named ‘Blood Relations’ had been developed in partnership with the Parents’ Circle / Families Forum (‘The Parents’ Circle’), an organisation of bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families based in the Middle East.⁴ The Jewish Society committee invited us to join ‘Jewish, Israeli and Palestinian students’ by giving blood at a dedicated donor session and to attend a related discussion with Parents’ Circle members entitled, ‘Pro-Israeli? Pro-Palestinian? Just Peace’. The advance publicity claimed that this ritual would contribute to ‘peace and reconciliation’ in the Middle East *and* at this divided campus. Yet within a few hours of the information appearing on social media, pro-Palestine activists expressed their opposition. Describing the initiative as ‘normalisation’, these students posted an online appeal for boycott, saying, ‘If you care about this conflict, I appeal to you not to go’.

The Blood Relations initiative was the latest instalment in an established pattern of conflict between pro-Israel and pro-Palestine student societies at this university, which reflected a wider dynamic of intense debate about BDS within British higher education (Sheldon, 2016). The Parents’ Circle were also implicated in these relationships through their collaboration with the Union of Jewish Students, an organisation proactively engaged in Israel advocacy, as well as BBR Saatchi and Saatchi Israel and the Peres Center for Peace.⁵ As a consequence, Palestine Society members were quick to express concern on social media that, ‘those WITH agendas are hijacking reconciliation’. As one student emphasised, ‘I do not have a problem with these two people grieving, but nothing exists in a vacuum, outside of its political

context. UJS certainly has an agenda in bringing them to reconcile in front of the students at this university’.

Despite the Palestine Society’s initial hostility, the Jewish Society organisers, Debra and Joel, seemed optimistic that this was a unique opportunity to overcome entrenched political divisions. In advance of the meetings, Debra circulated information via social media promoting the tag-line, ‘could you hurt someone who has your blood running through their veins?’ and stating that the aim was ‘to provide a catalyst for dialogue by demonstrating two peoples’ shared humanity through the common bond of blood’. Commenting on the event webpage, Joel elaborated that they hoped to bring ‘mutual suffering into a HUMAN level’ and to ‘promote understanding and cohesion locally’. As I walked with Debra to the donor centre, she explained that this was a way of imagining solidarity which ‘was not really controversial’. She expressed confidence in the moral potency of this symbol of blood; that this physical common denominator, which evoked the universality of biological life, could form the basis for a ‘natural’ solidarity that would transcend ethnic, religious and national differences. In this sense, Debra and Joel had drawn on an authoritative, moral and political imaginary, evoking the dominant Christian universalism of Western modernity (Anidjar, 2011). Surely this would be widely shared within the normative culture of that exemplary Enlightenment institution, the British university?

Yet almost immediately controversy erupted. The online event page became the focus of intense conflict as pro-Palestinian activists argued, ‘this event affirms the Zionist narrative and participating in it shows lack of solidarity with the Palestinian people’. Quickly, the dispute crystallised around the symbol of ‘shared blood’, which now became inseparable from the historical and ongoing racisms at stake in the Middle East conflict. Accusing the boycotters of believing that ‘some peoples [sic] blood is more valuable than others’, Joel denounced boycott as an antisemitic practice, which refused to recognise Israelis as individuals separate from their State. As a fellow Jewish Society activist added:

‘It seems that what your remarks actually betray in you is an attitude that refuses to acknowledge and hates to see revealed that individual Israelis can show human kindness. This isn’t about opposing the State of Israel but is rather a racism that dares not speak its name.’

In response, Simon, a student based at a neighbouring university, inverted the charge, associating the reciprocal exchange of blood with the Israeli State’s own exclusive claims for Jewish identity and its colonial devaluation of Palestinian lives:

‘I don’t believe that some peoples’ blood is more valuable than other peoples’. That’s why I refuse to accept a status quo where 1385 Palestinians were killed in the Gaza ‘War’ versus 13 Israelis. That would only be ok to someone who believed Israeli blood was 100+ times as important as Palestinian blood.’

In these ways, *both* universalist and particularist claims for ‘blood’ evoked chains of racialized meanings, exclusive claims to solidarity and so a dichotomising political imaginary. It seemed that, in the very act of mobilising symbolic language, students were caught in a binary political grammar that exceeded their control. Yet while analysing these mediated online discourses illuminates the symbolic reproduction of polarised relations, it does not render visible the *problem* with which sociologists should be concerned. Rather, it is through ethnographic

methods which draw us closer to the embodied experience of communication that we can begin to perceive how these oppositional grammars gave rise to forms of ethical violence.

Political solidarity: the lived experience of ethical violence

By the day of the Blood Relations meetings over sixty students had publically declared online that they were 'not attending' this event. Talking later with Sadiq, a British-Palestinian student involved in running the Palestine Society, he told me how the symbolic structure of this either / or decision occluded the more complex responses to questions of boycott amongst members who had very different attachments to the region. Sadiq described how he felt conflicted about the question of boycott; he felt pressure to take a hard line against dialogue from more 'puritanical' members and was also anxious about potentially betraying a cause that he had grown up with. I could hear a note of frustration in his voice as he described how it was often British far-left activists, without an obvious familial connection to the region, who expressed the most unequivocal support for boycott. But while Sadiq described how his commitment to free speech meant that he questioned some forms of boycott, he was also angrily opposed to the co-option of 'dialogue' within the terms of the British government's discourse of 'countering extremism' on campus. As such, presented in this situation with a stark binary choice between boycott or collusion, Sadiq and other members of the Palestine Society had unanimously chosen the former option.⁶

Despite the non-attendance of pro-Palestinian activists, the afternoon donor session was populated by Jewish students from surrounding universities and presented as a success. The contrast with the evening discussion with two members of the Parents' Circle, Robi and Seham, was stark. Held in a small seminar room on the periphery of the campus, I arrived to find Debra frantically wedging open the locked door to the building. She was clearly distraught as she told me, 'there's hardly anyone here...' Her distress seemed rooted in a sense of responsibility for the hurt caused to Robi and Seham, these women who had suffered profound losses, and were now rejected by students in Britain. Debra had pleaded online with activists to express their criticisms in person to the Palestinian speaker, Seham. In response, a student had accused Seham of being a 'house Palestinian'⁷, a collaborator complicit with her oppressors. Debra was well-placed to sense the violence of this response. A British Jewish undergraduate student who had recently taken up a position representing the Jewish Society, she had quickly become trapped within the oppositional terms of the UK student movement, unable as a named 'Zionist' to express her complex and often critical views of the Israeli government. To illustrate how painful this felt, Debra told me how she spent her summer interning for an Israeli human rights organisation working in the Occupied Territories. Yet when she had attended a Palestine Society event with a speaker associated with this organisation, she had been aggressively identified as 'pro-Israeli' so that she found herself silenced. In these ways, an identitarian logic fixed Debra as a 'Zionist', silenced Sadiq's uncertainties and denounced Seham as a disloyal 'Palestinian', denying each of them singularity, complexity or agency.

After a short delay, Debra resignedly announced that we should begin with the thirty people present. The lights were dimmed for the screening of a Saatchi and Saatchi promotional film featuring Robi, Seham and other Parents' Circle members donating their blood. The film featured a recurrent visual motif of blood flowing into a plastic transfusion bag. It culminated in images of Israelis and Palestinians hugging to a soundtrack of soaring violins, as the tag-line faded in: 'Could you hurt someone who has your blood running through their veins?' Sitting in the audience, I felt that there was something uncomfortably aseptic in this sentimental appeal to

a transparent, universal humanity. As a British-born Palestinian student activist, Saniyah, later told me, such 'emotional' techniques could somehow undermine the critical ability of activists to 'maintain your thoughts' in political encounters. And as students on all 'sides' had expressed, commitments to this conflict were shaped by complex, deeply felt attachments to people, places, histories and traditions. Many of these activists felt *torn* between responsibilities to their families, political allegiances and humanitarian sensibilities, facing precisely this dilemma of hurting their 'own' blood. Yet the political script of 'reconciliation' presented here demanded that we abstract ourselves from our complex, ambivalent and opaque feelings, and the particular histories we carried, in the name of a 'universal' solidarity. In this sense, it was not only the racialised signifiers but also the mode of communication mobilised by the Blood Relation initiative which had injurious effects. This cemented a reductive polarised form of relatedness that shamed and repressed the complex subjectivities of people struggling to respond.

As the audience applauded the Saatchi film, I felt these tensions in my body as I shifted uneasily in my seat, finding myself unwilling to participate in the boycott by walking away and yet silently angered by a PR script which also seemed to implicate me in a reductive claim to solidarity. Yet as I struggled with this impossible dilemma, to leave or stay put, the intimate presence of Debra, Robi and Seham somehow carried a gravitational force. It felt too violent to physically turn my back, and this sensation kept me uncomfortably seated within this seemingly failed space. And then gradually through this embodied 'gesture of waiting' (Das, 2007: 17), an alternative ethico-political possibility emerged. Slowly, in their words and gestures, Robi and Seham engendered an alternative form of solidarity.

Achieving non-violent solidarity: 'our pain is the same'

As the lights came up, the chair of the meeting introduced the two speakers. He described how Seham, a Palestinian from the Occupied Territories had followed her mother by becoming involved with the Parents' Circle after one brother was wounded and another was killed by the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). Robi was a South African Jewish woman who had migrated to Israel in 1967. She had joined the Parents' Circle after her son, David, was killed by a Palestinian sniper in 2002 when he was serving as a reservist for the IDF.

Robi stood up before us, a woman in her sixties with close cropped hair, dark eyes and a lined expressive face. She began by beckoning the audience, dispersed around the room, to move closer. Speaking in a low, grainy voice, without notes, she began to tell us a story about her first encounter with the Palestinian woman, Bushra, who had appeared with her in the promotional film. Robi had met Bushra for the first time at a Parents' Circle meeting in the West Bank:

'[Bushra] was Seham's very best friend and she lost her son three years ago. And Bushra wanted absolutely nothing to do with the Parents' Circle; she didn't want to see us, she was angry, she was full of depression, she's dressed in black from head to toe.'

Bushra had sat at that meeting with her back to Robi, with a big picture of her son on her chest. Yet, as Robi asked Bushra to share her son's name and describe what had happened to him, slowly Bushra moved towards her. Eventually, Robi asked if Bushra would like to see a picture of David:

‘She said “yes” and she looked at me and she looked at David and she looked at me and she said “Ḥarām”.’

As Robi finished describing her encounter with Bushra, she paused for a moment before continuing in a soft tone:

‘And that is the essence of what we do. You see there is no difference between my pain and a Palestinian mother’s pain. It’s the same. And that is a very *vital* element in what we are doing. It doesn’t mean that we have total trust; we have an innate trust that is based upon pain and the sharing of pain.’

Insofar as she was a representative of a universalising appeal to ‘shared blood’, Robi’s language of identical pain also seemed violently reductive, appearing to appropriate Palestinian suffering as her own (Frosh, 2011; Wright, 2016). As Robi herself acknowledged, there was a political sense in which the death of her son, as an IDF soldier, could not be equated with the death of a Palestinian civilian. Yet, to make the abstract judgement that her speech act was ethically violent would be to disavow Seham’s subsequent response. For, as Robi said these words, Seham supportively touched Robi’s shoulder and, as I will describe, continued to encourage and echo Robi’s claim to sameness.

In describing her encounter with Bushra, Robi presented a scene of two mothers who, as nationalised ‘Israelis’ and ‘Palestinians’, could not face each other. As Robi recounted, with Bushra’s speech act, ‘Ḥarām’, this relationship changed. Robi and Bushra *shared* a loss that was ‘Ḥarām’; and this shared quality resided *in* their language itself, for, as Robi explained, the word ‘Ḥarām’ which defines the morality of human action in Islam is also a colloquial expression in *both* Arabic and Hebrew. In this moment, as the voicing of this mutually intelligible word *expressed* a commonly sensed experience, it enabled a felt point of connection, a shared pain, to find release between them. In this way, Robi evoked what Stanley Cavell describes as a ‘spiritual instant’ of language use, a moment in which words ‘can mean deeply not because they mean many things but because they mean one thing completely’ (2002: 269).⁸

In the *Philosophical Investigations* (1967), Wittgenstein explored how different grammars of ‘sameness’ express and enable forms of epistemic and ethical relationality. His writing can help us to attend to the process through which Robi’s language of ‘shared pain’ began to offer an alternative to the binary symbolic grammar of the Blood Relations branding. Significantly, Wittgenstein approaches our practices of making claims to identity by focusing on a situation in which the possibility of knowing another’s pain is disputed. He asks what is at stake in the sceptical moment when we demand certain knowledge of the ‘internal’ state of the other and invites us to reflect on what we are doing when we say that a pain is shared in particular situations (Wittgenstein, 1967: para. 253). He then suggests that we already *know* the difference between a ‘sameness’ which requires scientific criteria of verification (such as evidence of shared physiology) as opposed to an ethical situation of responsiveness to each other. He goes on to challenge us to, ‘Just try – in a real case – to doubt someone else’s fear or pain’ (Wittgenstein, 1967: para. 303). When Robi described her pain as ‘the same’ as a Palestinian mother’s, she was not making a knowledge claim grounded in proof of identical physiology but, rather, was responding from one mother to another. Furthermore, the *truth* of this appeal to shared pain *emerged* through Robi, Bushra and Seham’s sensual interactions. It resided in the picture of Robi’s vulnerable waiting body as Bushra refused, and then turned, to face her. It was embodied in Seham’s trusting gestures toward Robi in this room, as she took the

risk of being labelled a traitor in order to support Robi's speech. In this sense, the ethical import of Robi's claim to 'shared pain' was not secured by a transcendent moral value of universality or reciprocity. It was rather indexed to the precarious, unfolding relationships in which it was uttered, and dependent on the unsecured commitments of those of us called to respond (Cavell, 2005).

When Robi paused, Seham subtly responded, enacting, for the audience present in this room, the grammar of solidarity which Robi had narrated in her story. Turning to Robi, Seham softly uttered, 'I want you to –' asking Robi to read a poem written for David. At this invitation, Robi slowly unfolded a piece of paper, as pausing and faltering, she muttered 'oy'. Then her exposed tearful voice began to speak simple, intimate words, at a quick tempo, as if, were she to pause again, her voice would close up:

'My little chick, I watched your plume turn to a khaki hue
I waved goodbye at the bus
Tears of disbelief to see you go
But I knew you were coming back

And then I watched you strut your stuff on the parade ground,
A soldiers game excelling as always with a grin
But I knew you were coming back

I listened to jokes about fellow combatants and washed your khaki plume,
To match your shiny boots and threatening rifle
I waved goodbye,
But I knew you were coming back

You left your khaki behind and donned a South American robe
And then a more academic colour
And once again your khaki plume
And you never came back
My heart shattered and the chick never came back

The man who made a hole in your heart, and mine, might be freed
And I agree, free him so Gilad can come back⁹
We both said, nothing is more sacred than human life,
So Gilad came back
But you are never coming back'

Robi's voice cracked in the concluding lines as the steady rhythm of her speech shattered, and the fragmentation of her life materialised in her language.

As Robi wiped her eyes and Seham, shaking, covered her face, I found that, in contrast to my sceptical resistance to the Saatchi film earlier, I was, suddenly, deeply touched. In the presence of this most sensual expression of the traumatic rupture of Robi's everyday life, I too was fragmented; I was overcome with tears. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw others reaching for tissues and heard people softly sniffing. The silence was filled with an awareness of the collective presence of the audience's bodies physically responding. In this way, the material

expression of Robi's fragmentation had connected with experiences in the room and we had been momentarily formed into a community present to this shared pain.

Cautiously, as Robi encouraged her, Seham now expressed her own fragmentation in and through language. She began by voicing her own struggles with her divided responsibilities as a child to her mother and as a Palestinian accused of normalisation:

'My mother was telling us how you should defend your homeland and... she always say that in some way you have to be strong... and on the other hand you have to be human. And I try to deal with this all the time, but she did it.'

After her brother was killed, Seham explained, 'my mother was the hero, she's the first one who... joined the Parents' Circle'. Then, nervously as her short speech drew to a close, she apologised for her stilted English, revealing how unacknowledged linguistic inequalities also structured the injustice of this transnational public space. Seham's voice was quieter, her contribution shorter than Robi's and yet she showed us how she had learnt to inhabit an embodied grammar that also gave her a voice:

'When I sit with a Jewish woman, I understand that this is my, my chance, and this is my stage to teach them how to raise their kids, I can sit with them, and they can come my place, they can come to my home, they can come to the women around'.

This practice of sitting together expressed a project of justice which was not grounded in the weighing up of claims and narratives by some transcendent standard but rather shaped an imminent process of transformation. Seham had shown us this possibility in her understated gestures; when she elicited Robi's poem, and so allowed her to express a shared truth, that to hurt a child is to hurt a parent. Now Seham concluded with a succinct yet deeply reparative gesture, which echoed and transformed Robi's poetic words. In response to Robi's claim that both her heart and David's had been shattered, Seham replied, 'The heart of Robi is my mother's heart. It's the same'. In imagining the heart as the organ of sensual connection, Seham showed *how* a singular experience of fragmentation could be a source of solidarity. Her poetic utterance brought one fragmented heart into connection with another, in a conjuncture of singularity and sameness, a non-violent moment of solidarity.

Extending ethico-political imaginaries for Palestine – Israel

At a time of intensifying polarisation and racism across the Middle East and Europe, there is an urgent need for a public sociology that engages with the transnational politics of Palestine – Israel. How then can the discipline address the tensions provoked by this conflict in Britain as it is shaped through entangled histories of violence, ongoing racisms and by the distorting structures that mediate responses? In this article, I have claimed that dominant dualistic imaginaries have been inadequate to this task and I have developed a sociological practice which offers a more creative possibility. By working through a singular encounter, I have shown how ethnographers can learn from Wittgenstein in order to draw us closer to the materiality, vitality and ordinary ethics of language in-situ, and how disciplined resistance toward intellectual and moral abstraction can bring us into proximity with ethico-political imaginaries created in the field.

My methodological approach to reimagining the transnational politics of Palestine – Israel is also grounded in what I learnt through my ethnographic relationships. In this case, Robi and Seham's arrival at a British university was dependent on a divisive PR initiative, which appeared to reproduce an ethically violent mode of political solidarity. Yet through an embodied linguistic practice, these women interrupted this symbolic framing, enabling a seemingly distant public to connect with the complex and painful lived experiences of this conflict. My claim is that in this moment of achieving an intimate connection *in* language, Robi and Seham cultivated an expanded imaginary of non-exclusive solidarity. Against the violently reductive grammar of identity as constituted by blood, they found a language to speak to people in Britain who struggle with fragmented investments in this conflict. Despite the problematic framing of this event, their practice cited maternalist peace movements and an ethics of mourning and carried these across borders into the educational space of the British campus. This opened a transnational university audience up to the possibility for a politics grounded not in the symbolism of biology or blood but in a precarious connection formed through togetherness, imagination and the experience of shared language.¹⁰

However, some important questions remain. Many months later, I encountered Robi again at a public event linked to International Women's Day, held in a Unitarian chapel in an English city. Robi was promoting a film documenting her work in South Africa, and on this occasion she was the only speaker. As Robi recounted almost word for word the story of her encounter with Bushra, I found that the spontaneous ethic of that earlier dialogical encounter with Seham had somehow transformed into its opposite. In this monological space, Robi's authoritative narrative became part of a frozen script that effaced tensions and apparently functioned as a source of social capital for Robi as she took up an expert position within the international field of peace and reconciliation. As Wright (2016) and Lentin (2010) have explored, this highlights how ethically precarious such a politics of mourning can be, when loss is objectified for political effect, and when solidarity activism reproduces unequal relations between the mobility, audibility and influence of Israelis and Palestinians in the transnational public sphere.

In light of this, what are the ethics of my own ethnographic writing, as I seek to communicate the spirit of the earlier encounter via the medium of an academic article? More broadly, given the socio-economic, political and cultural structuring of transnational communication, is it even possible to translate such an intimate, spontaneous and singular moment without distorting its ethical quality? Here, it is important to note that I am not making a generalised claim about the virtue of any individual, organisation, or solidarity practice. Rather I have sought to evoke the specificity of an embodied interpersonal encounter that took place in a British university setting, constituted by particular power relations affecting the lives of students invested in this conflict, as well as by a responsibility for cultivating learning. This is one way in which I learn from Wittgenstein to focus on the ethical entailments of embedded and embodied instances of language use. But in addition to this, I want to leave open the *question* of whether my method of narration opens up possibilities for those students and academics experiencing the tensions associated with dilemmas of boycott and dialogue. This is what is at stake in naming a 'formative' rather than 'performative' sociology, as a precarious practice whose 'success' is not guaranteed by convention but rather resides in the ongoing relationship between the sociologist and those they address (Cavell, 2005). Of course, as a rich body of scholarship highlights, aesthetic interventions into the Palestine – Israel conflict, raise complex questions around the ethics of identification and empathy under conditions of inequality and injustice (Bashir and Goldberg, 2014; Wright 2016). Yet rather than reduce literary

ethnography to a unilateral relation of domination and objectification, I also follow Biehl's faith in the capacity for ethnographic writing to 'push the limits of language and imagination as it seeks to bear witness to life' (Biehl, 2014: 111). For, in contrast to those forms of theoretical prose which reduce and caricature the people 'studied', a more poetic ethnography can liberate participants' own sense of what is socially possible and desirable. My ethnographic writing, inspired by Robi and Seham's risky and precarious encounter, has sought to evoke the ethico-political possibility that they momentarily opened up. In this way, I hope that my formative sociological practice can help to extend and mobilise this imaginary for a wider public.

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¹ Given that this conflict is in part constituted by disputed language, including for example the contested definitions of ‘BDS’ and ‘antisemitism’, I do not claim to offer a neutral account of these debates. Rather, my aim in these introductory remarks is more modest: to evoke the *tragic* tensions in attempting to speak about a situation that pits claims of justice and ethics against each other (Sheldon, 2016).

² One of the challenges of seeking to bring Wittgenstein into conversation with social theory is that the spirit of his later philosophical writings is not amenable to systematic exposition. As such, this article seeks to enact rather than describe a Wittgensteinian method.

³ Between 2010 and 2012, I conducted participant observation at three British universities, attending seventy-five student society events, observing online forums and conducting thirty ethnographic interviews with members of Jewish, Israel Palestine, Islamic and Socialist Worker student societies. I have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of participating students, pseudonyms and have made minor alterations to quotations from social media.

⁴ Established in 1995, The Parents’ Circle has offices in the West Bank and Tel Aviv and affiliated ‘friends of the Parents’ Circle’ organisations in North America and Europe. It currently includes over 600 Palestinian and Israeli families, all of whom have lost a close family member in the conflict. While Prato (2005) has explored the Parents’ Circle’s activities within Israel and the Occupied Territories, their work outside of the region has received less scholarly attention.

⁵ The Peres Center for Peace was publically identified by the BDS campaign as a ‘leading normalisation and colonial institution’ (PACBI, 2011).

⁶ In Sheldon (2016) I discuss further how questions of boycott raised internal tensions for members of student Palestine societies, including those without an obvious familial connection to the region, who were struggling to prove their belonging to this conflict. I also relate this to the institutional context of the securitised, Enlightenment university and to the diverse histories and commitments that students carried into this politics.

⁷ The accusation evoked Malcolm X’s distinction between the ‘house Negro’ and ‘field Negro’.

⁸ Here, learning from Wittgenstein, I do not offer an English translation of Ḥarām, as if the meaning of this utterance in this context is to be found in a semantic definition or the intentional mental state of an individual. Rather I am gesturing toward Ḥarām as a word which carries a particular linguistic history and becomes meaningful in its embodied and embedded *use* within this singular interpersonal encounter.

⁹ Gilad Shalit, a kidnapped IDF Soldier, was freed in 2011 as part of a prisoner swap which resulted in the release of the man who had killed David.

¹⁰ I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for highlighting how the Parents’ Circle draw on a long history of maternal social movements around the world, including in Israel and Palestine (Sharoni, 1997; Hammani, 1997; Werbner, 1999) and participate in the contested politics of grief and mourning in the region (Wright, 2016; Lentin, 2010; Prato, 2005). While my analysis takes up the important ethical critiques levelled at such initiatives, I also note these ethical questions resonate differently when the politics of Palestine–Israel is approached in its diasporic and transnational settings.